

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

The Silent War: At age 5, Marga Dieter knew how to keep quiet, and survive, in wartime Germany.

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, from WGBH in Boston. Of all the survivors of wars, as time goes on, it's the children who have the final say and maybe that's a good thing. Because they're the one's who can see it best in human terms. They didn't understand the politics of their war or the need to kill and die for a cause. They saw what war did to the people around them. To the people they depended on and that they loved.

One of the children, who survived World War II, is today's Morning Story teller. Her name is Marga Dieter. She was five when the allied bombs started falling on her town and her family in Germany. We call her story *The Silent War*.

[Sounds of war: bombs exploding, missiles propelling through the air and air raid sirens screaming their approach]

Marga Dieter:

In October of 1943, my oldest brother Sigmund and I walked down four or five houses to visit his friend Karl. But when we got to Karl and his mother's kitchen, there was no welcoming sound. There was silence. As we cracked open the door and walked in, we saw Karl sitting on his mother's lap in the middle of the room, on a painted chair. She held him sort of like you would hold a bag of potatoes because Karl was bigger than she was ever going to be.

Sigmund ran over to the chair, knelt down in front of this mother and child and put his hands under Karl, and as he pulled them back out, they were full of blood. I was four or five paces behind him and I wanted to leave. Just pretend that we could close the door and everything would be like the way it was before.

Sigmund says, "I have to take my little sister home, and as soon as I bring her to my mother, I will - I will be right back. This will be all right. Everything will be all right." Frau Behrens seemed like she had lost everything and Frau Behrens turns her head sort of like a windmill that's running out of air, and said, "Sigmund, how did Karl get hit with this shrapnel?" And Sigmund answers, "I don't know . . . We left each other in the street. I ran to the bomb shelter and he ran to the kitchen."

At that point, she dropped her head and started to cry. Sigmund brought me

back to our door and ran off.

[Solemn cello playing]

I ... I did not ring that doorbell and tell my mother what I had seen in that kitchen. I knew Karl wasn't going to get up from that chair, but I wouldn't tell her or anybody else.

[Music continues]

I knew she was so distressed by this war that my problems would simply spill over if I added anything to her already "filled glass." We, as children, could not add another little tiny drop, to the pain and agony they were already experiencing. You can't count on one of them, whoever they might be, to take care of you. It was much safer for me to keep it to myself, and tell my dolls.

They knew that Karl was dead. They said, "You better pay attention." Everything that mattered was survival, to be tough and to make it through. Don't ask, ... don'tbeg,.... just never be vulnerable. I, I actually believed that I could do better than any of them, that if I really paid very close attention, this wouldn't happen to me. That was the normal story of children during the war. Nobody wanted to hear those feelings.

It's my mother's birthday today. She would be ninety-nine years old. The past is what it is but [Marga speaks to her mother] "Mother, feel good about what you did. We were all the same, we were all frightened, we were all in the boat together and you struggled to find every potato you could for us, and now I know how much it took out of you to bring us safely through that war."

We need to mourn what happened to us. What we did. We need to mourn war.

[Sounds of air raid siren, cello finishes playing]

Tony Kahn:

That was Marga Dieter with today's Morning Story: *The Silent War*. I'm here in the studio with Gary Mott.

Gary Mott:

Tony, it's amazing that, at age five, she had the wisdom to realize that her mother was distressed and adding anything to her plate would've been too much.

Tony Kahn:

It's another way of saying that one of the things that war takes away from children is their childhood.

Gary Mott:

Right.

Tony Kahn:

This is a story about silence and I was just thinking how after every bomb that does fall, there is a kind of silence, and it's, its usually a cry for help or a shout of rage that can't be heard.

Gary Mott:

We have a video of Marga on our website, that we think you'll like.

[Cello resumes]

Tony Kahn:

We got a remarkable letter, which in a way is almost like the other side of the story that Marga told. I just want to read it to you:

"My father's youngest brother, Ralph, was a bomber pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force. I had only one vague memory of my uncle, standing in the doorway dressed in his Air Force uniform. To us kids, World War II was something far away that meant only the novelty of coupons and ration books and the excitement of blackouts.

"Ralph, along with his six crew members had died when their huge Lancaster Bomber was shot down on route to Hamburg, in January of 1943. In Amsterdam, Ralph's grave is marked by one of thousands of simple headstones in a place so huge, we needed a map and directions to reach our goal.

"In October of last year, three of my first cousins flew to Amsterdam. One of them, Don, had done extensive research on my Uncle Ralph and through the wonders of the internet had contacted members of an organization in Holland, 'The Crash Research Aviation Historical Society.'

"Henk Rebel is the director of the *Crash Society* and as a twelve year old boy, he'd witnessed an enormous nighttime air fight from his bedroom window of his family farm, in the Netherlands. He recollected watching the attack of the German anti-aircraft guns on the allied planes heading for Hamburg. And his terror, when a plane was shot out of the sky and appeared to be heading directly for his house. Fortunately the Lancaster Bomber veered to the left and Mr. Rebel heard and saw the enormous explosion.

"The next day, he and a friend managed to circumvent the German guards and visited the crash site. To the amazement of my cousins, he produced small

pieces of the Rolls Royce engine of the plane and then escorted them to the actual site, where it had crashed. As they stood together in a meadow behind a truck depot, Henk Rebel said, 'Now, we are standing with you, family of Ralph P. Campbell, skipper of the Lancaster, after sixty-three years.']"

"Then my Uncle Don, a Korean War Veteran and the next an ex-paratrooper, removed his tee shirt with a picture of the Lancaster Bomber and presented it to him, saying, 'With gratitude, I give you the shirt from by back.'"

"At our grandparents' graves, the three cousins, when they got back home, buried three small packets containing earth and stones from the airplane engine, the crash site and Ralph's grave in Holland. With a feeling of peace and a sense that our Uncle Ralph's spirit was finally at home."

Thank you very much for writing to us.

Gary Mott:

Please check out our website and check out the Marga Dieter video, <wgbh.org/morningstories> and let us know. < morningstories@wgbh.org>

Tony Kahn:

We'll see you next time. Take care.

[Cello music continues, then ceases.]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea